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Screen Influences on Preteens

Prior to the integration of screen-based technology into society's daily use, individuals greatly relied on face-to-face interaction, writing letters, and word-of-mouth. In the twenty-first century, however, screen-based media is introduced to children at extremely young ages. While adults try to limit the amount of time their children or students spend using technology, it can and typically does get out of hands as the children grow. Today, most preteens spend their leisurely time using their phones and text or tweet as their primary means of communication; and, thus, are missing out on learning imperative non-verbal emotional cues – communication without words that include facial expressions, posture, eye contact, and spatial distance – necessary for social interactions and behavior adjustments.

Researchers in southern California published an article in 2014 titled, “Five Days at Outdoor Education Camp Without Screens Improves Preteens Skills with Nonverbal Emotion Cues.” The research question that was investigated was: “Does children’s frequent screen use – and the possibility that this extensive use replaces critical face-to-face communication – promote the development of emotion understanding to the same extent as in-person interactions?” (Uhls et al., 2014). The study’s target population included children in the sixth grade from the same school, accounting for similar demographic variables; so, fifty-one students, the experimental group, enrolled in the outdoor education camp without access to technology, and fifty-four students, the control group, remained at school, not deviating from their daily routines.

Both the experimental and control groups were asked to take a pre- and post-tests to measure changes in ability to measure non-verbal emotional cues. Two types of exams were administered – the Diagnostic Analysis of Nonverbal Behavior (DANVA2) and the Child and Adolescent Social Perception Measure (CASP). DANVA2 showed the preteens forty-eight images on adults and children for two seconds and asked them to record the emotion they believed they were shown. Contrastingly, preteens watched ten videotaped scenes of child and adult interactions during the CASP exam and were asked to record the displayed emotions.

After using a statistical analysis, known as an independent sample t-test, researchers were able to confirm that the preteens who spent their time at the five-day outdoor education camp away from screen-based media significantly improved in recognizing different nonverbal emotional cues compared to the students that remained in class and did not alter their routines. The researchers claimed that being able to distinguish between these cues serves as an essential factor in maintaining peer relationships.

The researchers stated that the limitations to their study include the group experience, as well as the nature experience. The group experience limitation reflects upon the fact that both experimental and control groups were able to socialize with peers and adults on a daily basis – one group was not completely isolated over the other. The nature experience limitation reflects upon the fact that children at the camp engaged in activities pertaining to nature and could have been isolated from their peers while doing so. In the end, the researchers make remarks about future directions in improving their study.

Works Cited

- Uhls, Y. T., Michikyan, M., Morris, J., Garcia, D., Small, G. W., Zgourou, E., & Greenfield, P. M. (2014). Five Days at Outdoor Education Camp Without Screens Improves Preteen Skills With Nonverbal Emotional Cues. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 39, 387-392.
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